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ABSTRACT

This study examined the coping strategies implemented by older parents in their attempt to manage the pain and demanded changes which usually accompany the dissolution of family relationships. Fifty-two parents, ranging in age from 54 to 87 years participated in focus groups and personal interviews. A number of psychological and social resources were used by older parents in their attempt to minimize the discomforts engendered by an offspring's divorce. Many parents were able to relinquish a sense of personal responsibility for their child's divorce and maintain a sense of self-esteem, knowing that they did the best job that they knew how as a parent. Flexibility was also a personality trait that seemed to enhance one's ability to cope. Social support provided by spouses, friends, colleagues, and relatives proved essential for several parents. Parents incorporated a number of coping responses. Many engaged in cognitions which aided them in understanding and making sense of the situation. When children were perceived to be doing well with their new marital statuses, parents frequently described themselves as being better adjusted. Activities such as reading, working and exercising were also part of the individual coping repertoires of many parents. This research emphasized the importance of assessing the entire family situation when trying to understand an aged parent's response and level of adjustment to the divorce of offspring. (LLL)

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Coping with the Dissolution of an Adult Child's Marriage

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Poster presented at the 52nd Annual National Council of Family Relations Conference, Seattle, WA, November 1990.

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An important task for many married couples is the bearing and raising of children. Generally, parents desire to see their children grow up to lead productive and satisfying lives (Brown, 1982). Hagestad, Smyer, and Stierman (1984) assert that parents formulate distinct developmental expectations for their children. Parents try to prepare their children to carry out the tasks required of responsible adults. The assurance of having successfully raised their children liberates parents to concentrate on their own life goals and tasks.

When stressful events occur in the lives of their adult children, however, parents may encounter moderate to high levels of stress themselves (Greenberg & Becker, 1988). For instance, upon hearing the news of their children's marital disruption, most parents respond with a mixture of emotions which include shock, disbelief, anger, guilt, helplessness, and non-acceptance (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Brown, 1982; Matthews & Sprey, 1984). Initial responses of parents tend to be typical of the family's previous interaction style (Brown, 1982), with the strength and intensity of immediate reactions diminishing over time (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982).

When adult children divorce, their parents experience what Hagestad (1988) refers to as a countertransition, a transition which occurs as a result of change in someone else's life. Countertransitions are frequently difficult because they are life changes intitiated by others. An important part of parents' countertransition is the loss or alteration of relationships and interactions after the divorce, replacement of those relationships if remarriage occurs, and possible expansion of relationships if new spouses have children.

Despite the prevalence of divorce in today's society, few researchers have examined how aging parents cope with the divorces of their adult children. This paper focuses on the coping strategies implemented by older parents in their attempt to manage the pain and demanded changes which usually accompany the dissolution of family relationships.

Methods

Respondents

Fifty-two parents, ranging in age from 54 to 87 years (average age = 65 years) served as informants in this study. Thirty-one of the participants were women and twenty-one were men with 69% currently married, 11% widowed, 10% divorced, 6% separated, and 4% remarried. Parents had between one to eight children, with an average of 3 children. Sixty-three percent of the parents had one child divorced, 31% of parents had two children divorced, and 6% of the parents had three divorced children. Although some children were going through the process of the divorce at the time of their parent's interview, other children had been divorced up to 25 years. Seven of the children were divorced more than once. Forty-two of the divorced children were male, while 27 were female.

Research Design

Participants were recruited through advertisements in community newspapers and snowballing techniques. Upon expressing interest in participating in the project, the volunteers were sent background information questionnaires which were collected at the time of the interview. These questionnaires elicited demographic and familial information which was later used to construct family genograms and develop profiles of informants.

Initially, we conducted four focus groups (mothers, fathers, couples, divorced parents) consisting of six to eight parents, and lasting about 2 hours. (Refer to Krueger, 1988 for details of this methodology.) Participants of these groups provided us with information regarding

important areas of inquiry. Subsequently, we conducted personal interviews, averaging 54 minutes in length, with the remaining 27 individuals. Subjects were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions, the first of which asked that they briefly describe the experience they encountered with the divorced child(ren). The questions were intended to encourage parents to reflect upon **their** experience of their child's marital dissolution. Questions focused on a) parent's initial reaction to the news of marital hardship, b) parent's assessment of what happened to their child's relationship, c) ways in which parents were called upon to be helpful to their children during this process, d) effects of children's problems on their parents' marital relationships, e) impact of children's divorces on intergenerational and other familial relationships, f) modes of adaptation or coping strategies utilized, and g) how parents wish they might have responded differently. All parents were also asked to address any question we might have omitted which they believed to be important.

We analyzed the data qualitatively (Krueger, 1988). In addition to reading the transcripts in search of adjustment indicators and coping strategies, we also enlisted computer-based assistance through word searching capabilities provided by ZyIndex. This paper focuses on those resources and strategies that appear to be helpful to older parents in their attempt to adapt to their children's life change.

Results

The termination of an adult child's marriage was a stressful event for the aging parents in this study, whether the divorce was perceived as desireable or not. Consequently, the adjustment required of parents appeared to be substantial and persistent. Given the chronic nature of this experience, few parents said they experienced a sense of complete closure. In fact, many parents considered the divorce of their child to be one of the most difficult life stressors they had ever encountered. For many parents residual hostility, sadness and the like remain, despite their movement toward reconciliation with this child. A 56-year-old father of two children, both divorced, put it this way, "I can't say [my wife and I] are totally adjusted. It's a traumatic situation. I'm not sure how to adjust to it. You reconcile yourself to it, that this is what they want, they've made a proper decision... I don't think you really can adjust." A widowed, 63-year-old mother with two of three daughters divorced said, "I mean six years it's taken me and I still... I don't think I'll ever get over it." The constant need for adaptation was illustrated in a 62-year-old mother's comment, " Well, I think I'm still adjusting. I don't know if this situation will ever really be over in my lifetime..." Even when parents sense that they have adjusted, hardship of some sort frequently lingers. A 71-year-old mother of a divorced son said, "Well, I'm certain that we've adjusted. It's just that the heartache will always be there."

Parents in this study implemented a number of coping strategies in response to their children's change in marital status. Many parents indicated the need to understand what was happening and why it was happening. Although a few remained genuinely uncertain, almost all of those interviewed were able to speculate about what went wrong in their children's relationships. Some even predicted marital difficulties. Whether the termination was perceived to be the result of infidelity, being too young at the time of marriage, being too different in personality or religious orientation or a host of other reasons, parents seemed to indicate a need to understand what transpired.

Parents who did not hold themselves personally responsible for what happened to their children's marital union seemed to fair better than those who were not able to do so. Parents who had the sense that they raised their children the best way that they knew how seemed to

be providing themselves with a functional cognitive frame in which to adapt to the situation. A 54-year-old mother with three divorced children expressed what appeared to be a common experience among many parents. Although there were occasions when she questioned her contribution to her child's marital failure, she concluded that she was ultimately not responsible for choices her children made. She said, "I think what we did, we did well. We did right. I can't say that I'm ashamed to tell people [of child's divorce]... I am not ashamed of that at all... I don't blame myself, but I did question it once in a while." Comments like "we've given [parenting] our best shot," and "I did the best that I could" were common. Parents who were able to say things like "[The children] had a good model to follow" (66-year-old father) and "I didn't think [the divorce] was any failing on our part" (64-year-old mother) evidenced healthy self-concepts that seemed to withstand the test of self-doubt during trying times.

Related to this, most parents were able to cope by realizing that their children are adults capable of making their own decisions and living with the consequences. When speaking about what significantly helped in adjusting to his two sons' divorces, a 73-year-old father summed it up this way, "I think just tolerating, a high rate of tolerance, perhaps. And the philosophy that they should make their own lives and that we should butt out as much as possible and let them." One mother concluded, "I seemed to realize something that I didn't know till then, that they had to live their own lives. And that there wasn't anything that we could do."

Coping was also facilitated when parents were able to realistically appraise the situation and accept their inability to reconstruct the marital unit. One 70-year-old father, himself divorced said, " There's just such a powerlessness... You can't do anything about it... As far as adjusting goes, I guess about all I can do is try to accept the situation as it is and that way make it easier on myself. It's a learning experience. I, too, am growing through this. It goes to show you that you're never too old [to learn]." For most parents, divorce was not what they desired for their children. Even though they might have wished it were different, they learned to roll with the punches.

Religous beliefs and activities provided strength to persevere for several parents. One 62-year-old mother with one divorced son described the comfort offered through religion in the following: "...I think my faith in God is really the most helpful thing [for adjustment] because I know He's real, and I know He's close, and I know He's working in the situation. And I get impatient waiting, but other than that, I'm just trusting Him." A few parents specifically mentioned that their devotional lives and Bible study gave them "peace of mind" in this time of trouble. Many more mentioned the importance of prayer in giving them strength and in reducing their worries. A 64-year-old mother of two divorced sons captured the idea when she said: "I do a lot of praying. That always helps me through anything. And the fact that I felt that God was watching over them and taking care of them. There were times when I just, if I hadn't known that, I don't know if I could have handled that."

A few miscellaneous activities aided several parents. Reading was important for a few. One woman said, "I read everything I could find about [divorce]." Employment was beneficial to some, especially mothers. Exercise was highlighted as helpful by one individual.

One of the crucial elements in parental adjustment was the degree to which the adult children had successfully negotiated this life event for themselves. Parents were best able to deal with the change in family structure when they perceived their children to be managing successfully. Concern for divorced children's well-being was reduced when parents believed that their children were escaping a bad situation, getting "their act together," maturing, and taking care of themselves. When parents knew that their children were happy, anxiety

dissipated, allowing parents to resume their own activities and normal routines.

Various types of social support were also helpful in alleviating the negative effects of the divorce for aging parents. Friends or other peers, particularly those whose own children encountered marital termination, were cited most frequently as being instrumental for adjustment. One 62-year-old father who is now estranged from his only child, a divorced daughter, hesitantly admitted the value of talking to friends when he said, "...I've expressed my feelings to some friends, old friends. I can't say that that has helped. I suppose every time you talk about it, it helps whether you realize it or not. It kind of relieves the situation a little bit." Unlike those parents who preferred to keep their child's situation private for as long as possible, especially when they "viewed it as a failure somehow," most older parents found solace in knowing that they could be open with others. A 68-year-old mother with two divorced sons said, "Funny how we seem to draw parallels with other friends and say well, we had three sons, two of them divorced, and somebody will say, 'Oh, you too.' It is nothing unusual these days. The fact seems to be that more of our friends have children with broken marriages than have strong marriages. Maybe we live in the wrong circle. It certainly is nothing unusual." Being reassured that "it happens to all families" seems to help normalize the situation. Several parents expressed appreciation for the caring context which friends can provide.

Spouses also seem to be an important source of support. Having a history together, spouses frequently found their partners to be responsive to discussions about their children's situation. A 55-year-old mother expressed gratitude for the support provided by her husband in the following: "...my husband and I have certainly been a support for each other. And I think that we both are very agreeable as to how we handled it. And we talk to each other about it....should we do this or should we do that? ...I think that if I would have a question about whether we should do something, I would talk to him and, he never gives me advice though. He always let's me do what I feel that I should do. But sometimes just pounding it out helps. ...if it weren't for him being there, I think it probably would have been more difficult, a lot more difficult." A 55-year-old man with three of six children divorced spoke of his relationship with his wife in this way: "We've had to rally around each other. If I didn't have her to hug and she didn't have me to hug, I don't think either one of us could take it all. I feel sincere, I really appreciate her now... You need somebody."

In general, good and flexible relationships within the family were important. Being able to negotiate the appropriate amount of closeness and distance between family members throughout the divorce process assisted many parents in their own adjustment. One 64-year-old mother of four children, two of whom were divorced said, "As a family we were ...[very close]... and to see his brothers and sisters being supportive... was very sweet to me. To see them, you know, really reach out and love each other" she chuckled, "after all these years of the sibling rivalry." Continued, meaningful interactions with grandchildren greatly enhanced the well-being of grandparents as well. One grandmother reflected upon the significance of this in the following: "Seeing the [grand]children was really a help... They are very healing to any situation."

Speaking to a counselor or participating in a support group also proved helpful for a few parents. Ministers, therapists, support groups at church, Alcholics Anonymous, and Emotions Anonymous were all mentioned as beneficial for airing concerns and testing new modes of thinking or acting.

Two contextual variables emerged as important for adjustment. First, increased geographical distance from child seemed to reduce hardships associated with a child's marital dissolution. Parents living at a distance did not have the daily interruptions frequently

encountered by parents whose children resided close to them. As one parent put it, "Being half across the country gave us great detachment. If she had lived right here in our community and we had daily contact with them, it would have been a lot rougher." Second, the passage of time was cited as being responsible for improved conditions. Most admitted that while coping with the divorce of a child was tough, many expressed relief that "time heals all wounds" and optimism that "better times are ahead."

Discussion

An adult child's marital dissolution necessitates change and adaptation in the lives of aging parents. This paper described a number of social and psychological resources and coping responses utilized by older parents in their attempt to minimize the discomforts engendered by an offspring's divorce. First, psychological resources were deemed useful in ameliorating the situation. Many parents were able to relinquish a sense of personal responsibility for their child's divorce and maintain a sense of self-esteem, knowing that they did the best job that they knew how as a parent. Flexibility was also a personality trait that seemed to enhance one's ability to cope (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990).

Second, social resources or interpersonal networks also proved essential for several parents. Social support as provided by spouses, friends, colleagues and relatives appeared most salient. Information leading parents to believe that they are valued, cared for, and members of a network of mutual obligations (Cobb, 1976) was important.

Third, parents incorporated a number of coping responses. Many engaged in cognitions which aided them in understanding and making sense of the situation. These cognitive appraisals were significant in understanding stress levels (Boss, 1988). For instance, when children were perceived to be doing well with their new marital statuses, parents frequently described themselves as being better adjusted. Activities such as reading, working, exercising and the like were also part of the individual coping repertoires of many parents.

This research seems to emphasize the importance of assessing the entire family situation when trying to understand an aged parent's response and level of adjustment to the divorce of offspring. Consequently, the ABCX (Hill, 1949; 1958) and Double ABCX models (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982) of family stress seem useful in attempts to grasp the larger picture. Future analyses might assess individual components of these models. Such assessments might be particularly useful on an individual family level when intervention strategies are being developed.

This study points out the importance of informal social support networks as opposed to more formal, professional support. Very few of the subjects in this study availed themselves of professional help. Consequently, any intervention practitioners might consider should be aimed at strengthening the existing social networks older adults have. Finally, these data also suggest that we encourage interventions aimed at assisting adult children to cope with their life circumstances. By doing so we make the countertransition experienced by parents a more manageable one.

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